

Using Finding Aids

Archives are different than books on the shelves. Think of a metal file cabinet which has drawers and folders—except instead of a heavy cabinet, the folders are kept in gray boxes. Some collections may be small and are in one box; others are huge and use hundreds of boxes.

Many finding aids are now online so that researchers can figure out if there could be worthwhile sources to use. Finding Aids let researchers know what kinds of material may be found in the boxes and for what years.

1. Read the Abstract—it can be a very useful source of information about the topic. There is usually a bibliography of the sources the librarian used to write the abstract too so that a student can look for those books.
2. The Scope and Contents, Administrative history, or Biography gives more important background. They can also help you determine if the years you are interested in finding out about have been saved. For example, if the archives has material to 1969 but you want sources from 1980, you know that the collection won't help you.
3. The inventory list tells the researcher what is in each book, the kind of material they can find and for which years. However, the inventory does not tell the researcher what is written in each source so you never exactly know what you'll discover!
4. As you review the finding aid, note the series number (in case it is a huge collection), the boxes, and folders you want to look at. This can be done in advance before actually going to the library.
5. Make an appointment if that library asks for advance notice. Each library is different, so look at the policy. If an appointment is “optional,” the History Fair is still encouraged to make that appointment in advance so the requested boxes are ready when you arrive. Also, librarians know their collections really well, so they might make suggestions about other material you might want to view.

Going to a Special Collections Library

1. It's the appointment day! Make sure to give yourself a couple of hours to spend there because materials cannot be borrowed. *Every rule is the same for any adult that visits.*
2. Students will sign in and then be asked to put bags and coats in the locker. It is ok to bring notebooks, laptops, smartphone, and pencils into the research room.
3. There is a registration form to complete and sign. You will complete a form that lists each box you wish to see (unless the librarian has done it in advance when you made the reservation).
4. Follow the policies of photographing and crediting the material. Photocopying is possible too and History Fair students usually receive a discount rate.